

Caltech's Computerized Information Services

by Dana Roth

As many of you are no doubt aware, the library system at Caltech is quite small, reflecting as it does the very specialized research interests of a relatively small user group. Because of its small size, computer applications in the library have quite naturally been limited to what might be called the peripheral areas, i.e., serial lists, specialized book catalogs, and keyword indexes.

While computerized information services would appear to be a natural extension of these activities, user interest was very slow in developing. Prior to this year, we had tried a variety of publicity techniques (direct mail, seminars, and personal conversations), but never seemed to get anywhere. We feel that this reluctance, on the part of our users, to try out these new services developed largely because of the following three factors.

First was cost. On-site use of **Chemical Abstracts** tapes has been available for a number of years but the faculty considered the cost excessive. WESREC,¹ several years before CIS,² offered current awareness searches but again the cost seemed to discourage widespread interest. The few requestors we did have the opportunity of assisting made use of either the DDC or NASA services, both of which, incidentally, were free.

Second was the inability of many users to either conceive of a computerized literature search being of any assistance, or of a librarian being able to discuss their research interests. This I think is the crucial problem, and would suggest that if you don't have a science-trained librarian on your staff, you seriously consider working through a consortium where one would be available.

Third was the question of relevance. Many senior faculty members felt that while **Chemical Abstracts** contains a large amount of seemingly pertinent material, much of it turns out to be superfluous to their interests. As far as their current awareness is concerned, they find that a few specialized journals, **Current Contents**,

and reprints from their colleagues have and, for all practical purposes, will continue to meet their needs. I had always been a little skeptical of this view but, on the basis of quite a few discussions, this seems to be a valid point.

With this backlog of experience behind us, we finally came to the conclusion that until we have a few successful users, it would be virtually impossible to get the faculty and students to think seriously about computerized information services. Fortunately, this sudden insight coincided with the receipt of grant funds for some experimental literature searching and we decided to write, on our own, profiles for a few research groups from research reports and current publications available in the library. This has proved very successful not only in exciting the users' interest in a new tool but, more importantly, in breaking down the reluctance to discuss their research interests with librarians. I can't emphasize enough the need for these personalized sample searches. Apparently, no amount of talk will convince our users to spend an undetermined (or what seems to them an excessive) number of dollars on something to which they can't personally relate.

Following these initial successes, we again announced the **Biological Abstracts**, **Chemical Abstracts**, and **Index Medicus** services; but this time in the context of subject-searching in general and in conjunction with announcements of library-assisted searches of the **Science Citation Index**. We also suggested that the users describe their search on a standard form we use for Xerox requests. This time the response was somewhat overwhelming, partly because the searches were advertised as free, but mostly because these new users could finally see that computerized literature searches were a natural extension of the manual searching techniques with which they were familiar.

Dana Roth is sciences librarian at Caltech's Millikan Library. This article was adapted from a presentation at the "Computerized Information Services: A New Resource for Academic Libraries" conference, sponsored by the California Library Association, Chapter of Academic and Research Libraries, and held at UCLA, May 11, 1974.

1. Western Research Application Center, USC

2. Center for Information Services, UCLA